

Waiting For the Barbarians: Chapter 1

“Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt.”

Waiting for the Barbarians opens on a conversation between a magistrate and imperial officer. The protagonist of the story is the magistrate, a civil servant appointed to a far-flung outpost of a nameless empire. The magistrate had been looking forward to a quiet retirement, and had hoped to live out the last years of his service uneventfully. However, the arrival of the officer marks the end of this dream. The magistrate doesn't know exactly why he's been sent to this frontier town; he notes that he arrived from the capital citing 'emergency powers'.

Over the course of chapter 1, we discover that fear is brewing in the empire's capital about a possible barbarian invasion. The imperial officer is named Colonel Joll; he has been sent to 'find out the truth' about the rumours of imminent attack. He interrogates prisoners at the settlement, using brutal torture techniques to uncover details about their mysterious plot. The magistrate is repelled by Joll's methods, and argues that, under torture, people will say anything to spare themselves pain. Joll disagrees; he says that 'a certain tone always enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth.' The Colonel leads an expedition into the desert, returning with more prisoners who he subjects to the same brutal interrogations.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. From which department is Colonel Joll?

- (a) Third Bureau.
- (b) Fourth Division.
- (c) State Department.
- (d) Ministry of the Interior

2. When is the last time the magistrate returned to the capital?

- (a) Last month.
- (b) Six years ago.
- (c) He has not returned for some time.
- (d) He has never been to the capital.

3. What does the magistrate call the time before the arrival of Colonel Joll?

- (a) His 'pleasant days.'
- (b) His 'easy years.'
- (c) His 'happy months.'
- (d) His 'dreamy days.'

4. What is Colonel Joll's mission?

- (a) To find the truth.
- (b) To expand the empire.
- (c) To repel the barbarian invaders.
- (d) To explore new frontiers.

5. What is the magistrate's hobby?

- (a) Taking pictures of local villages.
- (b) Collecting slips filled with old script.
- (c) Drawing maps of the area.
- (d) Reading poetry.

6. The first group of prisoners sent back by Colonel Joll are who?

- (a) Nomads.
- (b) Farmers.
- (c) Fishermen.
- (d) Soldiers.

7. What does the magistrate do with the letter he writes about Colonel Joll?

- (a) Sends it to the capital.
- (b) Gives it to a messenger.
- (c) Saves it for later.
- (d) Tears it up.

8. What annoys the magistrate about the barbarian prisoners?

- (a) They do not practice good hygiene.
- (b) They do not attempt to escape.
- (c) They cannot speak the same language.
- (d) They wear inappropriate clothing.

9. How long did the Colonel's visit last?

- (a) Two days.
- (b) Four days.
- (c) A week.
- (d) A month.

10. What does the magistrate order at the end of the chapter?

- (a) Kill all the prisoners.
- (b) Return the prisoners to their homes.
- (c) Continue the interrogation.
- (d) Release the prisoners.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. On the first page of the novel, Colonel Joll is introduced. What do you find noteworthy about his introduction?
2. Colonel Joll uses torture and speaks about torture throughout chapter one – but he never actually uses this word. What do you notice about the way Joll speaks, the orders he gives, and the way he reports his actions to others?
3. In what ways are Colonel Joll and the Magistrate contrasting characters, even though they are both members of the Empire's hierarchy?
4. What does the magistrate's hobby (excavating nearby ruins) reveal about him? What does this passage add to the chapter?
5. After reading to the end of the chapter, what are your impressions of the magistrate? (Hint: you might think about the difference between his thoughts and deeds)

Novel Study: *characterisation*

Characters are all-important to novels. Much of the interest of a novel depends on the characters whose lives we enter and whose worlds we learn about. Who they are, how we connect with them, what they ‘mean’ can provide much material for thought and discussion. The closer a character is to us, the more we empathize. The more alien a character seems the more we tend to disapprove. One important aim of literature is to help people empathize with characters who are different by demonstrating how people share similar, fundamental, universal traits.

As a student of literature, when asked to talk or write about characters there is an emphasis on how these characters are constructed and how they are used by the writer to interest the reader and achieve certain effects. To be successful, you will need to learn the art of **characterization** and the techniques by which a writer can bring a character to life on the page. One of the most straightforward methods of achieving this is through the acronym STEALS, which encompasses all the major techniques of **indirect characterisation**:

- **S**peech – we can learn a lot about a character from **dialogue** and what they say to others.
- **T**houghts – the ‘inner life’ of a character can be revealed through thoughts and feelings, (particularly in a first person or third person subjective narrative).
- **E**ffect on others – how others **react** to a character can be revealing.
- **A**ctions – how the character behaves in certain situations influences our view of them.
- **L**ooks – the character’s **appearance** includes skin colour, facial expression, body language, clothing and accoutrements, shape and size, scars and marks, physical disabilities and so on.
- **S**ymbolism – authors use **imagery** and **symbols** to help establish characters. For example, a character can be associated with a particular object, element, sign, material or even sound or smell. The presentation of a character in association with fire, for example, might make one believe the character is warm, passionate, angry or dangerous. Ice would create different associations. The repeated use of a symbol develops it into a character’s **motif**.

Activity



After you have read Chapter 1, choose either Colonel Joll or the magistrate and create a STEALS analysis of this character. You can achieve this in different ways: you might make a chart, create a character profile, or write a mini-essay.

When you have finished, add your character profile to your Learner Portfolio.

*Mark Rylance and Johnny Depp play the magistrate and Colonel Joll in the 2019 film of Waiting for the Barbarians, directed by **Ciro Guerra**.*

Discussion Point: *the use of torture*

Colonel Joll seems to believe that the use of torture in times of war is justified as a way of getting information from people. Nevertheless, the torture he commits is hidden from sight, either conducted in an abandoned granary at the edge of town or the evidence is 'sewn up' inside a shroud. He also seems reluctant to talk about torture, preferring instead to use **euphemisms** such as 'pressure', 'interrogation', 'probing for truth' and so on.

Do you think that torture is something that should ever be used to ascertain information? Why / why not? In situations where torture is used, do you think it is right that it is 'hidden away'? What does this seem to say about torture and those who practice it?

Important Theme: *Fear of the Outsider*

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the 'empire' is a powerful nation, or collection of nations, that correlates to J. M. Coetzee's home nation, South Africa, but is deliberately left unnamed so that it can be seen as an allegory for any powerful empire or nation, past or present. The 'barbarians' are revealed to be nomadic peoples symbolizing subjugated people who live on the frontier of the empire. Although never named, they resemble black South Africans under Dutch and British rule who were expelled from their ancestral lands, which became dominated by white settlers, and sent to live in outlying provinces.

The inhabitants of the frontier settlement where the novel takes place treat the barbarians with suspicion. While they will trade with certain peaceful nomad tribes, and have sexual relations with them, they believe they are lazy, unclean, stupid and have a weakness for getting drunk. The soldiers and officers of the empire, such as Colonel Joll, are even more strongly prejudiced. They harbour a deep fear and hatred of the barbarians, convinced that they are a primitive, evil people who conspire to overthrow the empire. In the eyes of the empire's officials, the barbarians are **dehumanized** to such a degree that they deserve torture and murder.

Therefore, the novel shows how the barbarians are **Othered** by the soldiers and civilians of the empire. **Othering** is a process by which one group of people shares no common identity or humanity with another group of people. Often because they are 'outsiders', **Othered** people are seen as foreign, fundamentally different, even 'alien' (language that persists today in official travel documentation). Through the process of **Othering**, any possibility of rapprochement or reconciliation is impossible, as differences are too incomprehensible to overcome. Cast in the role of the **Other**, the barbarians are simply a plague or scourge to be eradicated from any territory the empire controls.

- What examples of 'Othering' can you find in Chapter 1?

Quotation Bank

If you only remember three lines, remember these...

<p><i>Looking at him I wonder how he felt the very first time: did he, invited as an apprentice to twist the pincers or turn the screw or whatever it is they do, shudder even a little to know that at that instant he was trespassing into the forbidden?</i></p>	<p>The magistrate is so repulsed by Joll's torture tactics that he cannot understand how a man can be so devoid of emotion. He wonders if, behind his impassive exterior, the torturer once actually felt a 'shudder' of revulsion himself at the methods he uses. The quotation reveals the magistrate's natural instinct to look for the humanity in others.</p>
<p><i>I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering. I ought never to have taken my lantern to see what was going on in the hut by the granary... once I had picked up the lantern, for me to put it down again.</i></p>	<p>The light from his 'lantern' is used to symbolise knowledge in this quotation. Having gained knowledge in this chapter, even unwillingly, the magistrate cannot forget what he has seen. The word 'infected' suggests that this kind of awful knowledge is like a sickness from which he cannot recover. There is also a contrast between the light carried by the magistrate and the 'darkness' of Joll's sunglasses.</p>
<p><i>It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once.</i></p>	<p>At the end of the chapter, the magistrate briefly wishes that he could erase all he has seen. Disturbingly, he fantasises about killing the prisoners and burying them in the desert, implying that even a good man like the magistrate can be tempted by 'easy' solutions should they be to his benefit. Diction 'terminated' betrays his uneasy thoughts of killing and hiding the evidence as he struggles to come to terms with what he has seen.</p>
<p><i>Based on your own reading of Chapter 1 and / or your classroom discussion, add two more memorable lines to this table, and provide analysis comments for each:</i></p>	